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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Reformation & Confirmation Sunday, October 25, 2020
 Texts: 2 Samuel 7:1-17, Luke 1:31-33

Leap

Introduction to Scripture

This fall we are reading highlights from the Old Testament and today we come to a text about David. David was Israel's second king, coming after Saul, who followed the period of the Judges which we touched on last week as Ryan preached about Hannah. This passage turns on three different meanings of the word "house," viz. 1) David's palace; 2) a permanent temple or sanctuary for the Ark of the Covenant, the chest containing the tablets of the law Moses received on Mt. Sinai, which represented the very presence of God, which heretofore resided in a mobile tent; and 3) a dynasty. Listen for God's word: *2 Samuel 7:1-17*.

Sermon

It's easy to be discouraged about our world. Of course, we are in the middle of a global pandemic with disruption, disease, and death all around. But aside from that, posts on social media shout police shootings, school shootings, political attacks, terrorist attacks, corruption, racism, war. And if reality isn't bad enough, our movies and novels are filled with dystopian worlds. It's easy to be pessimistic, even nihilistic. Might we be tempted to say with Shakespeare's Macbeth that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing?

And yet, amid it all there is great beauty, there are life-giving relationships, experiences of joy, and glimmers of hope. If you have ever watched a sunset melt across the evening sky, if you have ever had a true friend, if you have ever been enveloped by a piece of music, or laughed until you cried, you know that there's Something More. There's Goodness, there's Love, there's Truth, there's Justice. There's an Ultimate Reality behind and beside and within the universe that infuses everything and everyone. Life is not simply a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. At least that's the gamble.

Faith in the Something More is a gamble. Faith in God—or whatever you call the Something More—is a gamble. There's no empirical evidence that the universe didn't happen by a coincidental bump of primordial matter. There's no proof that love is stronger than death, that miracles do happen, that the lump in your throat is a divine nudge, that your life matters. The choice is between believing that a world of dog-eat-dog is just as viable as way to live as a world of do-unto-others-as-you-would-have-them-do-onto-you. It's a choice. It's a gamble. It's a leap of faith to trust that despite life's tragedies, despite all the evil, despite the seeming illogic, there is a great Mystery at the heart of it all which we call God.

And that God is big. Vast. Infinite. Not totally knowable. A being about whom we have questions and doubts. Big God; Big Questions. We wonder a lot. And that's good.

Our 2020 confirmation class and their families are worshiping in person today. You

confirmations are here because you are willing to take the leap, the leap of faith in God. You are willing to put your trust, as best you can, into the hands of God, as best as you understand God. You have been nurtured in your faith by the church, by followers of Jesus, who believe him to be the best expression of God that we know. If you had been born in Tibet or Saudi Arabia you might have been nurtured in a different religious understanding of God, but it is the same God. We have inherited our understanding of God from the Bible, comprised of the Hebrew scriptures that shaped Jesus and the New Testament writings about Jesus and his disciples. From these sacred texts we learn of a God who is big, yes, but who is also big-hearted.

The text from 2 Samuel that I read earlier has, in the history of the church, been a key passage for understanding God's *hesed* (in the Hebrew), i.e. God's steadfast love. As you heard, King David offers to build God a house, a temple. I think that captures our desire to try to put God in a box (so to speak), to wrap our heads around God, to contain God. But God does not want a house. Since the Exodus, the deliverance out of Egyptian slavery, the divine dwelling with the Israelites has been a tent. A tent is mobile. A tent is not permanent. The issue is divine freedom. A temple implies that God can be confined, captured, controlled. God wants none of that. Remember, God is big.

So, God rejects David's proposal and surprisingly reverses it. David will not build a house for God, but God will build a house, a dynasty, for David. God's promise of a dynasty is first a son who will succeed David on the throne. That will be Solomon. But beyond that, David's throne is to be made secure "forever." David's dynasty is to be everlasting. And God promises never to take away God's *hesed*, God's steadfast love, from that dynasty, a dynasty that in time was understood to be messianic, culminating in the person of Jesus. To King David, and by extension to us, citizens of the Kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed, God declares unconditional love. It is not dependent on moral purity or on theological orthodoxy, i.e. on doing or believing the right thing. God's love is free, and forever, and without conditions. It's like the way your dog greets you when you come home: she runs to the door, wags her tail, is oblivious to the way you look or smell or feel or even if you remembered to feed her. God is like that. God's love is unconditional.

I mentioned that this text with God's promise of unconditional love has been key in the history of the church. Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday, commemorating Martin Luther's nailing his 95 theses onto the Wittenberg church door. That was the 16th century version of posting a manifesto online. Luther's manifesto--his protest--kicked off the Protestant Reformation. He protested an understanding of God that had become warped, that had turned faith into a manipulation of God whereby you had to earn or even literally buy God's love. A rediscovery of passages in scripture that teach "justification by grace through faith" shook up the church and reformed its theology. The 2 Samuel passage has been a favorite of Protestant preachers ever since, since it points to God's unconditional love which you can't earn or buy. It reminds us that there's nothing we can do to make God love us or to stop God from loving us.

That's a concept that easier said than believed. So many messages we receive from our culture tell us that in order to be loved we have to be smart, or athletic, or beautiful. We have to have a perfect complexion, a great physique, and a big bank account. Yet, in God's eyes we are lovable simply for who we are, acne and all. In God's eyes we are precious, and nothing can ever change that. The great big Mystery at the center of the universe has a great big heart that embraces you and me and every human on the planet.

There's a story about a teen who got angry with his parents and ran away from home. He hitchhiked to the big city, drifted about taking odd jobs, and even stooped to some petty thievery which earned him jail time. When he got out, he had nowhere else to turn so decided to go home. But he was afraid of the reception he would get. It was in the days before cell phones and email, so he wrote a letter. He told his parents what day he would take the train. The tracks ran beside their farm. If it were okay for him to come home, they were to tie a white handkerchief to the front door knocker. If no handkerchief were there, he would not get off and just keep riding.

The boy's palms sweated as the train rounded the bend and his farmhouse came in view. He could hardly make out the house for every surface, it seemed, was covered in white fabric. Tablecloths hung from the porch rail, bedsheets fluttered from the windows, a shower curtain encased the entire front door. That boy couldn't leap off the train fast enough.

But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us: unconditional love is not cheap grace. That is to say, we can't get away with murder. Unconditional love does not mean there are no consequences. Unconditional love does not mean that we can live without regard to other people, to our environment, to the dog who needs feeding, or, more importantly, to the impoverished child who needs feeding, educating, and given opportunity to flourish and live with dignity and equality. Unconditional love is costly and hard to manage all by yourself.

That's where the church comes in. The church helps us learn to love our neighbor as our self. The church teaches us to return no one evil for evil, to strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering, and honor all people. Through the church God calls us to partner with God to make the world a better place. Together, we are leaven in the lump and light in the darkness. We are ambassadors of mercy. We are agents of justice. We are followers of Jesus who models for us a life of service and whose cross exemplifies ultimate sacrifice. As the church, we are called to take God's unconditional love of us and share it wherever we go.

Throughout Western civilization, the church has made a huge impact. It instigated the establishment of hospitals and universities. It fostered the study of medicine, science, philosophy, and literature. It patronized music and the arts. It has been foundational in movements for social welfare, abolition, universal suffrage, and civil rights. But as you know, the church isn't perfect and has been silent when it should have spoken, blind when it should have seen, and downright wrong in some of its actions. On this Reformation Sunday we remember our Presbyterian motto about the church that says we are Reformed, but always being reformed according to the Word of God. It is up to this generation—you--to hold the church's feet to the fire, to keep us attuned to where God's Spirit is bidding us to go, to stay relevant.

Today, you confirmands will pledge yourself to follow the great big God with the great big heart full of unconditional love, the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. You also will pledge yourself to be part of God's church. It's a big leap. But I cannot think of a more thrilling thing to do with your life. I cannot think of a better bet to stake your life upon!